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The Heart of the Matter: The Core and the Task of Core Revision

JOSEPH M. MCSHANE, S.J.

Commenting on his efforts to revise the core curriculum at the University of Chicago, Hugo Sonnenschein remarked in the *New York Times* of 28 December 1998 that “curriculum design at Chicago is a contact sport.” I suspect that his comment brought a wry smile to the face of every academic who read the *Times* that day. I also suspect that as the day wore on, their smiles disappeared and they began to regret ever picking up the paper that morning. Indeed, if most members of the American academic community are anything like me, I would imagine that by midafternoon, they were cursing Dr. Sonnenschein for shattering the peace of their Christmas vacations by dredging up unpleasant memories of their own experiences with core revisions, memories of endless meetings that left them exhausted, and of pitched battles that left them quite disturbed and angry. In other words, Dr. Sonnenschein’s flippant remark had the awful ring of truth to it.

If Dr. Sonnenschein’s opening comment hit home, the article’s litany of the elements that make core fights alternately bruising and draining, and endow them with the power to fill faculty members with dread, was also depressingly familiar: inertia, turf battles, differences in intellectual formation among the partners in the conversation (differences exacerbated by the generational divides that separate factions of faculties from one another), and disputes over the proper balance of core courses, electives, and major courses in a student’s curriculum. Sonnenschein notes, however, that faculty concerns are not the only elements that raise the stakes in the curricular wars. Far from it. He points out that the consumerist attitudes and career-orientations

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of contemporary students, many of whom bridle at the prospect of “wasting” so much of their college careers taking required courses that seem to add little to their post-graduation marketability, have added heat to an already hot situation.

While a quick reading of the *Times*’s account of Chicago’s grueling experience with core revision could easily lead any right-thinking and peace-loving professor to enter into a solemn covenant never to disturb the status quo, a more considered rereading of the piece would lead to exactly the opposite course of action. Throughout the article, the faculty members to whom the reporter spoke hint that the real reason why Chicago’s foray into core revision has excited such passionate debates among their numbers is that they understand that the University’s core curriculum (and, by extension, the core of any college or university) is just what its name implies: the heart of the matter. Put more prosaically, it could be said that the core curriculum embodies or summarizes the institution’s sense of its mission. In a very real sense, then, it also contains or bears witness to the educational vision that informs the college’s way of proceeding. Moreover, its power is contained in the transformative experience that it offers each student: through exposure to a series of courses, the student is invited or challenged to internalize the values of the institution and to make his or her own the institution’s vision of what an educated person is, and what role such a person should play in the world. Therefore, accepted wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding, fights over core revision are not merely turf wars over the inclusion or exclusion of this or that discipline from a student’s required course of studies. Rather, they are struggles that touch and reveal the very heart of a college.

It is precisely because the core occupies such an important place in the life of any college that it should be reviewed and renewed regularly. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the moment of core revision amounts to nothing less than a graced opportunity for the faculty of a college both to re-examine their central values and their philosophy of education, and to recommit themselves to the mission and vision of the institution. I would further say that without these periodic renewals, a core curriculum runs the risk of becoming merely a cultural icon bereft of the ability either to inform the life of a college, or to transform the minds and lives of its students.

In the case of Jesuit colleges and universities, I would say that periodic core revisions are not merely optional opportunities for grace-filled rededication. Rather, for Jesuit colleges and universities, periodic core review and revision border on moral imperatives. Since that statement may sound more than a bit extravagant, a bit of an explanation may in order. As a result of the incarnational inspiration that stands at its center, Jesuit education, like the redeeming Lord Himself, must always be oriented to the world. Therefore, it must always be ready and willing to engage the world, even as the world is changing. Therefore, Jesuit colleges and their curricula must always be seen as works in progress, works that are kept alive and useful by the tension (sometimes creative, sometimes annoying and draining, but always somewhat messy) between their deeply held desire to engage and serve the world, and the bewildering complexity and mutability of that world. Moreover, the Ignatian way of proceeding has always been characterized by a commitment to discernment, self-criticism, and continual adaptation to changing needs. In the world of education, the call to discerning adaptation requires that Jesuit colleges and universities seek to adapt to the changing needs of the students they serve.

If all of this is true, then Jesuit education (like the entire Jesuit enterprise) is a frontier phenomenon, always seeking to reach out beyond easy and accepted boundaries to find new ways of embracing the world and engaging men and women. If this is true, then Jesuit education is not unlike Jesuit priesthood, of which John Courtney Murray says, “The vocation of Jesuit priesthood is simply this: to explain the Church to the world and the world to the Church.” If one prefers the documents of the Second Vatican Council to John Courtney Murray, then one would say that the work of Jesuit education is to train students to read the signs of the times in light of the Gospel and the Gospel in light of the signs of the times. To put it more simply, Jesuit education is dialogic. Since it is dialogic, it needs both the Word of God (on which it depends for life and sense), and the world to know what it is and what it is called to do.

In order for a Jesuit college to make the most of the moment of discerning rededication offered by a core revision, it is essential to enunciate two guiding principles at the outset of the process. First of all, the faculty must be challenged or invited to see the core as the possession of the entire faculty. (By this I mean to say

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that the faculty must be reminded that, although individual departments and programs may be charged with staffing core courses, the work of constructing, reviewing, and supervising the core belongs to the entire faculty.) Given the level of specialization present on most faculties, this may be a hard saying indeed. If the discussions concerning core revision are to avoid the kinds of turf battles that so frequently characterize such undertakings, however, it is imperative that the faculty move beyond departmental concerns and begin to think as a unified body. Once this principle has been recognized and accepted, the faculty as a unified body must be invited to reflect on its sense of what it means to be an educated person in the modern world. (In other words, the final product should reflect the shared wisdom and experience of the entire faculty.) Second, in order to foster a shared sense of responsibility for the core that is being developed, the college must commit itself to constructing a process that leads to ownership of and commitment to the new core. With regard to this point, it is essential that the architects of the process make ample provision for wide and regular consultation with all of the members of the faculty. Although the conversations that result from this consultative process may (and probably should) be as bruising as those that accompanied the University of Chicago's core revision, they should be entered into boldly, in the hope that they will foster greater participation in the process. Participation in turn will lead to a greater sense of ownership on the part of the entire faculty. Ownership will result in a higher level of commitment to the new core. Finally, this heightened sense of commitment will enable the core to perform its tasks of creating a community of discourse on campus, and imparting a shared vision of life to the students.

Given the high (and mission-related) stakes involved in the conversations surrounding core revision, it is important that the chief academic officer of the institution throw his or her weight behind the process. Since, however, the curriculum is primarily the concern of the faculty, he or she must remember that the credibility of the new core will be enhanced if (a) the most senior and most respected members of the faculty take an active part in the process; (b) the committee represents a wide variety of disciplines; and (c) ample provision is made for the expression of different educational philosophies. Although on first blush these admonitions may seem to create the conditions for either chaos or gridlock, on closer inspection it becomes clear that if

they are ignored a far greater danger exists: the core that is produced can easily be dismissed as the product of a narrow group whose deliberations did not adequately reflect either the wisdom or the wishes of the faculty at large.

Only after these guidelines and principles have been enunciated and accepted can the work go forward. As it does, the committee must wrestle with two major issues. First, it must seek to engage the entire academic community in an honest discussion of the institution's sense of its mission and identity. Second, it must confront the question of whether, in its work of establishing the institution's general education requirements, it wishes to construct a true core, or adopt a menu of distribution requirements.

With regard to the first challenge referred to above—the challenge of engaging the entire academic community in an honest discussion of the institution's sense of its mission and identity—in the case of a Jesuit college or university, the community must be invited to reflect on both the distinguishing characteristics of Ignatian spirituality, and the meaning and goals of Jesuit education. The first part of the discussion is by far the more important. In the course of the conversations concerning Ignatian spirituality, the members of the faculty should be invited to grapple with the central incarnational themes that captivated Saint Ignatius and led him to the articulation of the world-embracing and transformative spirituality that shines through the Spiritual Exercises. These fundamental conversations may at times be draining and challenging, but if they are properly and creatively joined, they should allow the participants in the discussion to grasp Ignatius's worldview and his anthropology, both of which have clear implications for the shape and style of Jesuit education. In fact, it is only after they have come to terms with these central themes that the partners in the conversation can begin to wrestle with the meaning and goals of Jesuit education. Understanding of the main characteristics or themes of Ignatius's spirituality can lay the groundwork for further discussion of the implications these themes have for developing a distinctive

educational philosophy, creating a community of discourse, and establishing or revising a core curriculum.

The two central themes of Ignatian spirituality alluded to above (its affirmative and incarnation-inspired outlook on humanity and the world, and its emphasis on personal and social transformation) have endowed Jesuit education with its distinctive feel. In an academic community serious about affirming its Ignatian identity and mission, these themes can and should exert a powerful influence on the formulation of the core curriculum. To be sure, the core curricula of Jesuit schools will continue to resemble those of other institutions in many respects. Specifically, like the core curricula of other institutions, they will aim at providing students with basic skills in the areas of writing, public speaking, and mathematics; they will

seek to preserve and transmit basic bodies of culturally significant knowledge; they will aim at creating and sustaining a community of discourse on a campus. If taken seriously, however, Ignatius's worldview, anthropology, and concern for personal and social transformation should lead to the creation of a curriculum with a difference, and that difference should have something to do with fostering some rather specific and apostolically significant habits of mind and heart in the students who attend

Jesuit schools. To be more specific, Ignatius's incarnation-informed anthropology should, almost inevitably, lead to the creation of an unabashedly humanistic core that invites students to explore the wonder and complexity of the human condition. (This same incarnation-inspired outlook on humanity should also affect the way in which the student is treated.) Ignatius's concern for personal and social transformation should show up in efforts to include in the curriculum courses that will (a) provide students with the opportunity to wrestle with the perennial and contemporary moral issues; (b) encourage them to develop a sense of responsibility for the world in which they live; and (c) awaken in them a genuine passion for justice and a desire to be moral and responsible citizens of the world. In other words, if the main themes of Ignatian spirituality are taken seriously when a faculty addresses



the task of constructing or revising a curriculum, the result will almost inevitably be a curriculum that is both value-laden and consciously teleological.

With regard to the challenge of deciding whether they wish to construct a true core curriculum or merely adopt a set of distribution requirements, the members of the curriculum committee must begin their deliberations by weighing both the educational benefits and political advantages that the two systems of general education offer. On the educational front, it is clear that, by exposing students to a repertoire of common texts, authors, and thinkers, a core is more adequately suited to the task of creating a community of discourse on campus. It is also clear that, with its carefully worked-out sequence of courses, a true core will enable a college more effectively to provide its students with a coherent educational experience, and to introduce them to a unified worldview. While a true core curriculum may enable a Jesuit college to achieve many of its mission-related goals more easily than a set of distribution requirements, the work of marshalling support for such a curriculum is daunting and labor-intensive. Therefore, the members of the core-curriculum committee must read the political signs of the times very carefully. In doing so, they must first determine, on the basis of their conversations with their colleagues, whether or not the faculty shares or is interested in developing a common philosophy of education. If they do, in consultation with their colleagues the committee must then prepare a carefully articulated sequence of common courses that both reflect this philosophy and promise to provide their students with a coherent, cumulative intellectual experience that will invite them to share the same. If, however, they determine that their colleagues do not share a common sense of mission and are thus not ready to commit themselves either to the painstaking work of constructing a true core curriculum or contributing to its implementation, the committee must try to prepare a set of distribution requirements that captures or enshrines at least some of the institution's most cherished ideals and values.

In the case of a Jesuit college or university, the members of the committee must make their decision based on their reading of their colleagues' readiness to engage in intense mission-related discussions on the distinguishing features of Ignatian spirituality, their enthusiasm for the philosophy of education that flows from them, and their willingness to commit themselves to the task of engaging in an admittedly teleological edu-

cational enterprise. Whether the faculty of a Jesuit college or university opts for a true core curriculum or an "enriched" set of distribution requirements informed by Ignatian principles, however, they should never entertain the idea that once the new curriculum that they have created and to which they have committed themselves is in place their work is done. Even less should they think that they have produced a perennial curriculum, a curriculum for the ages. If they were to give in to either of these temptations, they would be denying one of the most fundamental and important characteristics of the Ignatian way of proceeding: continual discernment, continual self-criticism, and continual adaptation to the changing needs of the evolving world that Jesuits and Jesuit schools are meant to serve. Therefore, as James Loughran wisely points out in the article that appears in this issue, in their curricular revisions the faculties of Jesuit schools should take care to provide mechanisms for the kind of regular, periodic review that will continually breathe life and usefulness into the educational experience that they offer their students.